

**Interview with Sarah Lahr
Conducted by Mia Gardner for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

March 26, 2008

Mia: Okay, this is Mia Gardner and I am having the pleasure of interviewing Sarah Lahr; it is March 26, (2008), and we are interviewing for the Providence District History. Good morning Sarah thank you for coming. I have a list of questions here but first let me introduce you a little bit.

You have been living in the area since 1951 and are a very active member of not only our neighborhood Holmes Run Acres, our Community but have been involved in the County and in Providence District for many, many years. Um I have in front of me a publication that Holmes Wood Acres did for the 50th anniversary; it's called "The Community Within and Beyond" articles from the Holmes Runner by Sarah Lahr and I will be giving this to the people who are writing the History of Providence District because I think it's full of gems for them. But, in the meantime let's talk about some more gems that you can tell us about.

I am going to start with a little bit of background information such as asking you how long you have been in Fairfax County, in Providence District, what brought you here and a little bit about your background.

Sarah: Well, Ray and I moved here in September of 1951 we had lived in Arlington County for 8 years before that and in Chicago for 18 months before that. I was married in 1941 so that's the history of the places where we lived. My husband worked for United Press and was transferred from the Wash to the Washington Office to cover the John L. Lewis mining situation which was very hot at one time who ever heard of John L. Lewis today. When Ray went into work he took the only car we had and I was quite marooned and that inspired me to be very active in the community to have something to do to get to know the neighbors, stir up trouble all that sort of thing, which I did.

Mia: Indeed, good trouble. Um you're you've been involved in journalism before moving here; tell us a little bit about that.

Sarah: I had Journalism major in college and worked briefly as what they call a 'stringer' for the Omaha World Herald before I was married. I've been an amateur scribbler every since.

Mia: I know you have written in every issue virtually every issue of the Holmes Runner which is the newsletter of our community. Um and it is now 57 years going and you have had an article in there just about every single issue which is amazing.

Sarah: Well, I don't think that is quite accurate. My memory is not very good but when I was working full time for the school system I do not believe I was as active on the Holmes Runner as I had been in the past. So I think there is a lapse in my contribution and probably it was a relief for everyone.

Mia: I don't think so I don't remember a Runner, we've been here since 66' and I don't remember a Runner without one of your articles

Sarah: Okay, your memory is better than mine. But the earliest days I was an editor I think I was the third – fourth, fourth editor of the Holmes Runner. In those days we used a mimeograph machine, and that is all history in there.

People have heard of it until they are tired of it but those of us who were not trained to run a mimeograph machine learned quickly. We had to type our own copy of course and so every piece had a different type face. It was really not very professional for publication but it had a lot of news because the County at that time did not provide it to its citizens as well. And when people wanted to know where do I get a dog tag we had to find out you know that sort of thing - very simple information: where do we find the Health Department, where do we go to get a license, how do we register to vote, - you know the very basic things that now we take for granted. That had to be in the Holmes Runner and it came out every month.

We had a lot of columns that had long since been dropped. One girl that was very active in a column about religion, she visited various churches, there was an active book club that had a column, checkers or chess, I really can't remember. All kinds of things cause you see were really dependant on each other for amusement at that time we were so isolated which is not true today.

Mia: Well, that brings us to for this interview we need to go beyond our wonderful community and talk a little bit about the area around us the district the County around us and certainly you have seen many, many changes. What was around us in the 50's? Not very much, as you said we were quite isolated.

Sarah: Yes.

Mia: So perhaps you could describe what was around us.

Sarah: As I understand it Holmes Run Acres was built on an abandoned farm. But the farm was probably part of a tobacco plantation; you know tobacco was the main crop of Virginia. But there was oh, over where Fairfax Hospital is and that part of the Western area close to us had been a Civil War camp it's my understanding, of the Northerners of course. But, ha, ha, ha, ah there was people living back in those woods. I don't know how they got in there kind of hanging out. It was, these were Black people. It was quite primitive. The kids use to love to go down over towards Holmes Run to our north and to find all sorts of treasures from bullets from the Civil War, and even arrow heads and stuff from the Indians. They also got poison ivy.

Mia: laughing.

Sarah: Lots of it I remember that.

Mia: Lets go a little further a field - the other day you described Tyson's Corner to me as it was back then and actually there was something in your description that I had never heard about before so would you describe what Tyson's Corner use to looked like?

Sarah: Bare ground, empty, (cough, excuse me) it had a very tall tower, metal on top of which was a look out station for the forestry service looking for fires and down someplace close to the base of that tower was an Esso station that had one pump. A very countrified little old station; it saved my life once when I had gone out to Centerville to get corn cob ground up, corn cobs ground up for dressing on the flower bed, suppose to be ideal.

Mia: um.

Sarah: When I asked, the people were extremely puzzled and finally the manager of the store came over and said well that is a good mulch but corncobs are so tough they ruin all of our knives and slicing devices and we've just stopped doing it anymore so I didn't get the corncobs but I ran out of gas except that the car was showing a full gas tank.

Mia: Oh dear.

Sarah: Anyway that one little holer one holer gas station with a very black man and this is the first time I had encountered a very black man by myself. I was on this little side road at Tyson's Corner; that was a very memorable occasion.

Mia: um hum.

Sarah: He saw how nervous I was and he felt badly about it but.

Mia: Well it was a new experience.

Sarah: Absolutely.

Mia: But that brings us right back to something else I wanted to ask you about. Um you were on the school board at a time where the schools were still segregated.

Sarah: Yes.

Mia: And the pressure was on to integration.

Sarah: Yes.

Mia: And tell us a little about that experience that time.

Sarah: Well, the Supreme Court Decision that separate is not equal was in 1954 and it was some years later when I was on the school board, in the early 60's and the administration, was moving they said with all deliberate speed. Of course it was an all white school board; I think there were seven of us. Two women, most liberal shall we say of all the board members was the other woman I would say, and three, four rather conservative men, five rather conservative men. Um they weren't in any particular hurry. They were natives of Virginia – didn't want to change the system particularly, they weren't racists - just was comfortable to be the way things had always been.

But, we were hailed into court by a group of black families who said that the school board was not moving quickly enough toward desegregation. And I personally thought we weren't either. Ah they had the most famous lawyer in the County I think - to do their case and he was very ill prepared and in spite of the fact that a sympathetic white judge tried to help him every way he could, he bungled the case so badly that Judge Bryant said they had to lose. They had not presented the details about how they suffered from the lack of speed and all that sort of thing. However, in a year or two there was desegregation in the schools.

Now, the other woman member when I was on the board was a woman named Martha Gertlaggan, and at that time the only black school for high schooler's was Luther Jackson named after a black gentleman.

In the records of the County school board meetings they're called the colored which makes my hair stand on end. But anyway, um that was a school that at its most populated very top enrollment was 502, which makes it a small school. But when it was converted into a middle school or

intermediate school or whatever they were called they went through several changes in names. It was a jewel of a school because it had a real auditorium as high schooler's have and middle schools don't. And it had all kinds of facilities that aren't normally in middle schools.

But Martha had said in order to make that school acceptable both to white parents it had to be closed for a year. This was our most liberal school board member. It had to be closed for a year and cleaned from top to bottom, and it was the most immaculate school in the whole school system, repainted, redone and renamed. None of which happened. It happily was made into the middle level school that it was and has been ever since.

Mia: Lately I just heard this, I don't know if you've heard it yet cause it is very recent, but now Luther Jackson has been designated as a one of the Magnet Schools for gifted and talented program. Gifted and Talented Program.

Sarah: I hadn't heard that.

Mia: Yeah, um hum.

Sarah: Great.

Mia: As of this year I believe; so it's now gotten another dimension. And of course now as you have seen at Woodburn now Luther Jackson is not only integrated in the sense of the black community and the white community, they are equal. Thank goodness it has been for decades now um it is you know international school as well. But the number of different nationalities that are represented in our schools around here now is just phenomenally interesting and wonderful.

[Clock chiming]

Sarah: One of the things that we need to mention about the change in

Luther Jackson is that is has been made into the official meeting place for the School Board, which meant that the auditorium was adapted to those formal meetings. And a television studio was at the back of the auditorium and they have more comfortable seats than the hard wooden seats that they have. And ah official private session room for school board when they talk about personnel problems and may not do that in public, is off the stage behind the stage as it were.

Ah the school board offices school administration offices have moved or are in the process of moving nearby to a building at York Towne Center, as you probably are aware. And in the end they hope to bring in all the school offices that have been scattered in former schools and rented space into that one center; which will have a building now in use and in place. And another twin to be built that they held on the land for that which of course is very close to Luther Jackson - just about a couple of blocks away making it much more centralized.

Mia: Which building at Towne Center?

Sarah: I am not sure, down by where the AAA's use to have

Mia: Oh, down the road there.

Sarah: um hum.

Mia: Ah you and Ray were very involved with Woodburn School origins, way back when?

Sarah: I was he was not.

Mia: Okay, you were and you certainly have seen a lot of changes. What was it like getting a school started in this area?

Sarah: Well when we were looking at houses ah you drove in Hemlock Drive and to the right there at the corner of Hemlock and Gallows Road was

a vacant area with a sign "This is dedicated to an elementary school". That's what they call a proffer and a proffer has resulted in many schools in Fairfax County.

To deal with a man who wants to construct a community a whole lot of houses in the county, they dicker with him and if he will give such and such land for a park for a school for whatever, then you can have this higher ah zoning, what do they call it, designation to put your houses closer together or whatever.

Anyway, the school went up and I believe it was dedicated in 1954 and they were given a flag by our Congressman by the name of Joel Broyhill an ardent Republican who lived in Arlington County. Ah, I do not remember the name of the first principal - Mrs. Wheat was the name of the second principal and she was there quite a while. And I had a good deal to do with her. But they began enlarging Woodburn School very shortly after it opened because it was too small. In those days the school classrooms were in what we on the school board use to sneer at as egg crate schools - all exactly alike - just boxes put next to each other and to save money presumably they were just bare bones classrooms. Even a closet was an add on to be paid for in the Bond Issue over 30 years. We found that a scandal. But anyway – ridiculous - but they could brag and say we are putting up schools for nine and a half dollars a square foot or something like that. The egg crate designations of course have changed; some school classrooms need bigger space and different space and lots of smaller spaces and it was the elementary wing – no, no the primary wing they call it down Hemlock that part that had the most changes I think in recent response to the needs of different groups. I think that the as I understand the blue print for the reconstruction that is underway now is that much of the change will be at the upper level for the older children with more space for computer outlets. They are closing off rooms that had been opened before to a corridor, which is harder for the kids to concentrate, I believe. They've gone through that fashion in our school system.

Mia: Well in the 70's is when we had that major renovation they turned the egg crate rooms into the open classrooms. That whole wing was open classrooms and now I understand with this renovation now we're going

back, not to egg crates but to the more standard closed classrooms. It is like a cycle that's going around.

Sarah: Yes, I believe that's true. I would have found an open classroom very hard to study in and very hard to pay attention in with the noise from other classes nearby.

Mia: Right, right. What are some of the things that you think of when you think well the change of one telephone for the entire neighborhood when it was first built to you know now, communication is quite easy what other changes outside of the community in terms of access, like where did you go to shop, where did you go to make your phone calls - probably at that one telephone booth, um tell us a little bit about where did you go when it was so isolated?

Sarah: When we first moved in Ray had the category of one air or whatever it was that entitled him to a telephone as soon as there was a telephone but there were no telephone lines. There was a telephone on Sycamore at the top of the hill and it was used particularly by the workmen if they needed to call or get some more supplies or call and check on a specification or something. One night I went up to call Ray to find out when he was coming home for supper and I could not get my dime in the slot or nickel whatever it was, it was flat, absolutely flat and there we had no telephone in all of Holmes Run Acres - that was pretty bad. I assure you that was pretty bad to be so isolated. Um Gallows Road was a small two-lane road without a shoulder on either side, very narrow and winding and it was real country. There was a horse emporium where just about now where the bridge is over the beltway and many stories have been told about how the horses which were not too carefully watched over would get loose and come over and visit in the Acres and chew the flowers.

Mia: Oh, no. Where was the horse emporium?

Sarah: Well it was - they had horses to rent.

Mia: But where was it located?

Sarah: As I've said (phone rang) There you have the phone.

Mia: Actually I'm going to go get it.

[Recording paused]

Mia: Sarah what kind of things do you think are quite different now a days in Providence District than in the past?

Sarah: I can't speak for Providence District I can only speak for Holmes Run Acres, but it seems to me that there is perhaps a smaller number actively engaged in actively concerned with our government, with the budgets that we have to supply the things that we need - more participating in the past it seemed to me we were then we are now. I remember going to school budget hearings and it was sort of like a wedding, all of the baddies were on one side and all of us goodies were on the other side. And us goodies were considered carpetbaggers by the baddies who were the farm owners and their plea for every raise in the budget for schools was "you are taxing us off our farms". Well those farms are now developed and they are living on their millions in Florida; but that wasn't what we were hearing then. They actively booed they actively booed at a hearing, people who were asking for more taxes to supply more teachers more supplies for the schools.

Mia: Better roads.

Sarah: Better roads, I was thinking of the School Board hearings but the things that we felt that were really deficient in the County and have come to be considered part of the County now - were not so then. And there was always this group that very actively and loudly opposed us. At one point there was a Taxpayer's Alliance or something; I think they still appear at budgets. How deep their conviction is, I don't know. There are not many sites left in Fairfax County to be taxed off the farms of. You know Fairfax County has grown up so that they are regentrifying older spaces now, they don't have lots of room. But, I do believe I absolutely believe that these worthwhile additions to make our life safer and ah more comfortable came because of citizen pressure. I'm convinced that Special Education should for

instance grew with expanded - met the needs of more children because of pressure from parents and this includes the programs for gifted children, which use to be called special education.

Mia: So one of the big changes you think is that the citizens are not as involved in (clock in background chimes) pressuring for various improvements there certainly is a lot of talk about roads and development.

Sarah: Well there's a difference between griping, complaining and doing something about it and it seems to me that in the old days we tried to do something about it now people - why don't they?

Mia: Um hum

Sarah: And I kind of get impatient.

Mia: Well certainly Holmes Run Acres is one of the more active communities.

Sarah: Oh yes indeed.

Mia: Still is.

Sarah: Not all of us.

Mia: No people are much busier now

Sarah: Of course.

Mia: with both parents are working and with computers I feel computers take up a lot of time.

Sarah: Yes, but some of the needs have been met. The very pressing needs have been met. You know we have a good health department; we have very good schools and that sort of thing. And we didn't. You know Falls Church use to be part of Fairfax County and they sued to leave Fairfax County because they felt the schools were so poor that they wanted to

have their own schools and they won the suit. They could prove they could demonstrate that Fairfax County schools were inferior. They tried to annex some more poverty some time later. I couldn't make that statement because the Fairfax County schools had improved and Falls Church had found out that they have to rely on Fairfax County for some of the more esoteric needs that they have - children with some very special developmental needs or something like that, they contract for the County.

Mia: Um hum I wonder if they are sorry now.

Sarah: Oh no! They're a very smug little village, excuse me that's unkind to say but they really are.

Mia: Um hum.

Sarah: They like it that way, they call themselves the village but they can never expand beyond their 4 square miles, not ever.

[Recording paused]

Mia: Where did you go shopping? And now when you look at Tyson's Corner do you just

Sarah: I stay away from it.

Mia: You stay away from it, that's a good idea.

Sarah: Goodness gracious going through it is enough. I had to go through it today to take my taxes to my man who has an office out in Great Falls area. Excuse me. Um there were some shops in Annandale ah I think there was a general store we all loved which is now replaced by a restaurant. I don't there were very, very few and of course if I had to shop on weekends because I didn't have a car to get there. It was when we moved into Fairfax County it really was a very rural area and not sophisticated and now it is urban suburban

Mia: Um hum.

Sarah: with a population as you know well over a million children, people. Some of them are children I guess. But ah it has grown so much and yet some of the old things remain. Many of the roads and place names go back to colonial times.

Mia: Um hum.

Sarah: You know the Little River Turnpike use to be a way for farmers to roll their hogs heads of tobacco down to the port in Alexandria.

Mia: Hum.

Sarah: I think there were even toll houses along the way there I - my memory is not that good.

Mia: Um hum.

Sarah: But Dot Hamerschmidt maybe could help you with that Dot Hamerschmidt.

Mia: Dot Hamerschmidt.

Sarah: Yes. Um this is an old part of the United States; I am from Nebraska which was Indians and Bison during the time when colonial Virginia was in its prime. So we had to adjust.

Mia: Um hum. Well I promised you that I would not take too much of your time this morning since you are leaving for the opening of the Quilt Center at the University of Nebraska tomorrow so I appreciate it and should you think of anything else that you think we should include in the Providence District History please call me and ah we will add it to this.

Sarah: I would like to mention, it may be in one of the little booklets when we first moved into our house we had mail delivered to our door. Across the road from us, served under the Annandale Post Office - it was a mailbox at the corner by the edge of the road. Our mailman for many, many years

was a black man Will Costner who had been in the Seabees; his wife was a teacher at James Lee School, which then was a segregated elementary school - is now a community center. They eventually had a little girl who I think is a teacher but lives down in South Carolina or someplace. Will Costner was just everybody's friend and we all loved him dearly.

Mia: Yes I remember him too, um hum he was, he was very special. Well speaking of very special it's very special to have you here, very special to have you as a part of our community.

Sarah: Pooh.

Mia: Not indeed not pooh and um thank you for the interview and I actually took out your booklet "The Community Within and Beyond" and reread it today and it was just as enjoyable as the first dozen times that I read it.

Sarah: By golly.

Mia: Thanks Sarah.

Sarah: Thank you.

Mia: Bye now.

Sarah: I think I've got to go.